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AIR FORCE CORE IDENTITY AND ITS IMPACT ON RETENTION

by

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Abstract

Over the past few years, retention has been an ongoing challenge to all military services and the United States Air Force is no exception. Many have posited a strong economy as a reason for people exiting the Air Force. Others have asserted that it is because of the personnel drawdown along with an ever-increasing operations tempo. Still others have pointed to a lack of core organizational identity that decreases the cohesiveness of the Air Force. This study describes the concepts of organizational identity and organizational culture, their importance, and their relevance to the USAF. This study also analyzes the foundations of Air Force core identity; defines current Air Force identity and pinpoints current threats to that identity. This paper reviews retention trends and current retention challenges in an attempt to draw a relationship between Air Force core identity and retention rates. Lastly, the study provides suggestions for enhancing Air Force core identity and subsequently combating the resultant retention problems.

Chapter 1

Background on Air Force Core Identity and Retention

A core identity is a product of a military organization's traditions and culture. Core identity provides military organizations with a sense of "self" and "self-esteem." It provides the impetus among the organizations' members in building and maintaining a sense of commitment, obligation and belonging. The United States Air Force presently lacks a well-defined core identity; people identify with their units or their weapons systems, but not with the Air Force mission. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States Air Force has been undergoing tremendous changes. Many of these changes were in the form of personnel and budget cuts. Numerous and continuous changes have challenged the core identity and self-esteem of the United States Air Force. Continuous changes to a well-established institution such as the United States Air Force, coupled with a lack of a definite core identity, may be a root cause of the current retention problems in the Air Force's active duty and reserve forces.

Over the past few years, retention has been an ongoing challenge to all military services and the United States Air Force is no exception. Many have posited a strong economy as a reason for people exiting the Air Force. Others have asserted that it is because of the personnel drawdown along with an ever-increasing operations tempo. Still others have pointed to a lack of core identity that decreases the cohesiveness of the

Air Force. The lack of cohesiveness and subsequent decreased sense of commitment, obligation and belonging could be an origin of current and future recruiting, and retention challenges.

This study describes the concepts of organizational identity and organizational culture, their importance, and their relevance to the USAF. This study also analyzes the foundations of Air Force core identity; defines current Air Force identity and pinpoints current threats to that identity. This paper reviews retention trends and current retention challenges in an attempt to draw a relationship between Air Force core identity and retention rates. Lastly, the study provides suggestions for enhancing Air Force core identity and subsequently combating the resultant retention problems.

Chapter 2

Organizational Identity

Identity is vital to any organization. Identity defines what the organization is and what the members of the organization believe and value. Identity affects an awareness of purpose and creates a sense of commitment, obligation and belonging among its members. According to Setear, et.al., "From the analysis of high-performing groups – groups of people who have performed well above expectations or the norm – one of the most consistent attributes is a shared sense of identity and purpose."[1]

Identity and identification are powerful needs; they describe individuality and uniqueness.[2] Individuals, and subsequently organizations, possess an overwhelming desire to define themselves. According to Stuart, "Part of the power of the constructs comes from the need for a situated sense of entity. Whether an organization, group or person, each entity needs at least a preliminary answer to the question 'Who are we?' or 'Who am I?' in order to interact effectively with other entities over the long run."[3]

The identity of an organization provides members with a strong sense of purpose. It provides members with an awareness of the parts that they play in the organization's overall success or failure. "By internalizing the group or organizational identity as a (partial) definition of self, the individual gains a sense of meaningfulness and connection. Identity and identification explain one means by which individuals act on behalf of the

group or organization. Thus, theories of identity and identification are infused with motivation and feeling."[4] Identity is central to organizational membership, which provides an extended sense of self that is motivated by an essential need to belong to something bigger and better than the singular self.[5] This need to belong is a basic characteristic of human nature.[6] Individuals define themselves through interactions within a group and being a member of an organization assists individuals in defining themselves within the context of society.[7]

Identity is extremely important, not only to individuals, but also, to organizations. Identity is the foundation or cornerstone of an organization. The identity, once formed, established, and assimilated by its members, provides the organization with a powerful cohesiveness. A collective, distinguishing and mutual sense of identity appears to be the hallmark of successful organizations.[8] Organizational identity produces a bond that provides strength and resiliency to withstand challenges to the organization's existence. In his article, "Organizational Identity and Identification" Albert Stuart states "…an organization must reside in the heads and hearts of its members. Thus, in the absence of an externalized bureaucratic structure, it becomes more important to have an internalized cognitive structure of what the organization stands for and where it intends to go -- in short, a clear sense of the organization's identity. A sense of identity serves as a rudder for navigating difficult waters."[9]

Organizations operate in an uncertain, changing environment. Because change is a constant, identity is crucial to the future of any organization.

Notes

[1] John K. Seater, et.al., *The Army in a Changing World: The Role of Organizational Vision*, RAND Report, R-3882-A, (April 1990): 67

Notes

[2] Stuart Albert, "Organizational Identity and Identification: Charting New Waters and Building New Bridges," *Academy of Management Review,* No. 25, 1 January 2000, n.p.; on-line, Internet, available from http://www.jsonline.com/news/nat/ap/oct99/ap-laser-defense-b103199.asp.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Marilynn B. Brewer and Wendi Gardner, "Who Is this 'We'? Level of Collective Identity and Self Representations" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* 71, 1 (1996):83.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] Seater, et.al., 67.

[9] Albert, n.p.

Chapter 3

Organizational Culture

There are as many definitions of culture and organizational culture as there are different cultures and organizations. Simply stated, culture is shared traditions and customs of a society that impacts its daily existence. Organizational culture can be defined as "a system of shared backgrounds, norms, values or beliefs among members of a group…" (Schein, 1985).[1] Organizational culture, like societal culture, is inherited and bestowed to future generations.[2] Culture and organizational culture are learned behaviors that are unique and relatively constant; when cultural modification does occur, it is gradual.[3]

All organizations have their own unique culture, which influences its identity. The two concepts of culture and identity are closely linked. "Culture is to an organization what personality is to an individual."[4] Personality and identity are also closely related concepts.

Another way to view organizational culture is "a patterned way of thinking."[5] This patterned way of thinking affects organizational identity. "Any organization's patterned way of thinking reflects what is variously called its essence or the beliefs of the corps around its core."[6] Essence is identity.

In each organization there exists a select group of career specialists who influence the daily practices and define the operations, tasks, and functions of the organization. [7] "Within even the most complex organization, a single professional elite possesses knowledge, skills and orientations identical to the mission and activity of the organization. This is the corps elite – the elite profession within the organization – and it defines the essence, sets the culture, and determines the vision that exemplifies the organization."[8]

Since culture and identity are integrated concepts, it is imperative for organizations to impart a positive culture to its members. Culture enhances identity and identity provides purpose. The integrated concepts of culture and identity give rise to vision, purpose and direction. According to Smith, "If the culture is shared and endorsed across the various subgroups that comprise the organization, then a sense of *mission* exists, and the organization is relatively cohesive, both internally and in its approach to the outside world." [9]

Organizations whose membership shares a common culture also shares a sense of cohesiveness and a sense of vision, purpose and direction. In embracing organizational culture, members also share commitment to the organization's purpose or mission. Also, members feel obligated to the organization and they experience fulfillment through feelings of belonging. In short, they know who they are and they know where they are going within the context of the organization. They achieve a sense of identity through culture.

Once again, according to Setear, et.al., "From the analysis of high-performing groups – groups of people who have performed well above expectations or the norm – one of the

most consistent attributes is a shared sense of identity and purpose."[10] Distinctive identity and positive common organizational culture are highly integrated and are keys to the success of any organization. The US Air Force developed such a culture during and after World War II.

Notes

[1] Richard L. Hughes, Robert C. Ginnett, Gordon J. Curphy, *Leadership: Enhancing the Lessons of Experience,* Third Edition, (Boston: Irwin/McGraw-Hill, 1999), 456.

[2] Lt Col James M. Smith, USAF, Retired, "Air Force Culture and Cohesion: Building an Air and Space Force for the Twenty-First Century," *Airpower Journal,* 12, 3 (Fall, 1998): 41.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] John K. Seater, et.al., *The Army in a Changing World: The Role of Organizational Vision*, RAND Report, R-3882-A, (April 1990): 67.

Chapter 4

United States Air Force Identity Development

Since the end of World War I the United States Army Air Corps possessed an unshakeable identity that was deeply rooted in the mission of strategic bombing. In the Pacific during World War II, United States forces were on an "island hopping" campaign designed to obtain air bases close enough to allow strategic bombing of the Empire of Japan. Strategic bombing, the United States Army Air Corps' premiere theory of airpower, was not initially successful. Success came when General Curtis LeMay began incendiary bombing attacks on mainland Japan killing hundreds of thousands of Japanese. The objective of the attacks was to break the war-making capability of the Japanese military and the will of the Japanese people. Finally, with the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Empire of Japan surrendered. The United States emerged from World War II with theories and doctrine that advocated strategic bombing as a solution for winning wars.

With the National Security Act of 1947, the United States Army Air Corps became the United States Air Force – a separate and independent military service. Post-World War II, the United States Air Force's priority mission and identity was centered on the possibility of aerial delivery of nuclear weapons against the Soviet Union.[1] At this time the Strategic Air Command (SAC) was the premiere organization within the Air Force

and resources were allocated to the production of a global bomber, the B-36 *Peacemaker*. The strategic bombing identity was a powerful presence and created a sense of mission and purpose for the Air Force. However, this strategic bombing identity was challenged from time to time.

The Berlin Airlift had proven that airlift was a vital and decisive force. However, its success was virtually unnoticed; airlift has always remained a secondary mission to the power wielders and decision-makers of the Air Force. Air Force identity has never been associated with airlift.[2] Strategic bombing theory was challenged by tactical aviation in Korea. B-29s destroyed all appropriate strategic targets in Korea within days of the beginning of the war. Fighters took center stage where the United States' F-86 *Sabre* aircraft entered "dogfights" with Communist MiGs in the infamous "MiG Alley." Theories about the use and applications of tactical airpower began to evolve. Also, possibly not evident at the time, is the fact that North Korea was a "low-tech", agrarian society. There were relatively few "industries" to attack, however, toward the end of the conflict, dikes and dams were targeted. Of what use is strategic bombing when there are few "strategic" targets? During the Korean Conflict, tactical airpower was the decisive force in the outcome of the air war and challenged the supremacy of the strategic bombing mission and identity.

Beginning around 1966, the Air Force was pressured to "re-think" the strategic bombing mission and consequently its organizational identity. "From the 1960s on, the Air Force adapted its culture to accept a primary role for the aerial delivery of tactical nuclear and non-nuclear weapons, but strategic bombing pilots remained at the top of the Air Force until the early 1980s, when for the first time a tactical pilot became Air Force

chief of staff."[3] The Air Force's primary mission began to evolve. With this transformation, the Air Force "…lost its guiding vision (strategic airpower theory) and thus its cultural cohesion."[4]

The Air Force today is very technology-oriented. The advent of nuclear weapons at the end of World War II gave rise to nuclear deterrence at the beginning of the Cold War period. "This wedding of the Air Force to nuclear deterrence gave entry to the missile and space community, which accelerated the shift to a focus on technologies over missions. The lack of a strategic role in Korea and Vietnam gave rise to the tactical subculture as well, splitting the Air Force core and leaving only weapon systems as a focal point."[5]

In the 1980s, technology was the fuel feeding the internal schism. Not only were there definite fracture lines between pilots and support personnel, but there were divisions between the pilots themselves. The divisions were based on what type of aircraft the pilots flew – fighter, bomber or transport.[6] Air Force identity began to evolve around the technology of the weapon system, instead of around the mission.

Strategic nuclear deterrence was the primary mission of the United States Air Force through the end of the Cold War. It continued to be the primary mission focus because the Soviet Union possessed nuclear weapons. However the strategic deterrence mission eroded further when the former Soviet Union reduced their capabilities toward Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START) II limits.[7]

The Air Force anticipated the reduced impact of the strategic nuclear deterrence mission and developed a new mission statement: *Global Reach, Global Power*. The focus of *Global Reach, Global Power* was "…conventional, long-range power projection

and precision bombing against regional threats."[8] *Global Reach, Global Power* demonstrated forward thinking and articulated the changing of the Air Force mission. New technologies and a new fighter pilot elite advanced the new vision. The changes were gradual and purposeful thereby preventing any major disruptive effects to the force.[9]

During the Gulf War, *Global Reach, Global Power* demonstrated responsive, decisive airpower that was both "rapid and lethal."[10] The Air Force attained an identity based on technology, precision, flexibility and decisiveness that gave it precedence over other services in rounds of personnel drawdowns and budget cuts during the post Desert Storm period.[11] "The Air Force was developing a clear vision of its future and demonstrating that it was ready to carry out that vision."[12]

Air Force identity development although deeply rooted in the strategic airpower theories of the post-World War II era, changed in a gradual process over the years. Change, once again, is a constant and the Air Force recognized the need to adapt to the global and political environment. The core identity changed from the mission of strategic bombing to an identification with a particular weapon system. Change, which leads to growth and development, is normally a "painful" process. Human beings, as a rule, are very resistant to change. Change necessitates leaving a "comfort zone" which is an environment where most people thrive. After the Cold War, new technologies pushed the United States Air Force into an arena that was unfamiliar and *new*. This inaugurated a period of the service attempting to formally re-define its own identity through publications such as *Global Reach, Global Power* and the Core Values.

Notes

[1] Lt Col James M. Smith, USAF, Retired, "Air Force Culture and Cohesion: Building an Air and Space Force for the Twenty-First Century," *Airpower Journal*, 12, 3 (Fall, 1998): 42.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] Smith, 43.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] Smith, 44.

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Smith, 45.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] *Ibid.*

Chapter 5

United States Air Force Identity Crisis

At the end of the Twentieth Century, the United States Air Force was more determined than ever to define and establish its core identity. Senior Air Force leadership realized the importance of identity in giving the service a sense of focus, direction, purpose and mission.

Colonel Ron Rand, Director of Public Affairs, United States Air Force, explained in a recent article concerning Air Force identity, that during extensive research on the issue of identity, research results demonstrated that Air Force members feel a sense of belonging and allegiance to the units where they are assigned. Furthermore, the research pointed to the fact that Air Force members did not generally feel that they were part of the larger organization of the United States Air Force.[1] The research confirms the Air Force is still focused on the technologies of its weapon systems and that there is no established and well-accepted unifying purpose among the men and women of the United States Air Force.

Without a well established sense of identity and unifying sense of purpose, the fault lines that exist between factions within the United States Air Force are reinforced and inhibit the organizations' capability in general and impeding its members from working together as a team. Once again, the fault lines are between and within the fighter,

bomber, airlift and space/missile communities, and other non-rated support communities. With no unifying sense of identity, the cohesion that is necessary to make a military service into a fighting team is degraded, thereby inhibiting team efforts to achieve their fullest potential and attain mission success.

"The US Air Force has a cohesion problem. Dr Donald B. Rice, former Secretary of the Air Force complained that officers identified with their weapon systems, not with the Air Force or any concept of service mission or doctrine. Carl Builder agrees. To Builder, the Air Force has no strong, unifying mission or vision, so loyalty has devolved to functions, technologies, and occupations."[2] The lack of a well-established and accepted identity within the United States Air Force may stem from a lack of focus on airpower doctrine. General John P. Jumper, Commander, Air Combat Command, once stated "The thing we do worst in the Air Force is to read and understand our own doctrine."[3] Although the Air Force has had doctrine for years, only a small percentage of Air Force members have actually read, understood, and applied its concepts.

In addition to doctrine, the Air Force published "The Little Blue Book" *Air Force Core Values* and *Global Engagement: A Vision for the 21st Century Air Force in* 1997. *Global Vigilance Reach and Power: America's Air Force Vision 2020* followed with a publication date of November 2000. The publication of these documents was a further attempt to go beyond doctrine and to focus on and define Air Force core identity.

The *Air Force Core Values* publication and subsequent program were an attempt to encode a moral and ethical foundation for service in the United States Air Force. "The Core Values are much more than minimum standards. They remind us what it takes to get the mission done. They inspire us to do our very best at all times. They are the

common bond among all comrades in arms and they are the glue that unifies the force and ties us to the great warriors and public servants of the past."[4] These moral and ethical concepts were of great concern in defining Air Force core identity, especially in the aftermath of the Blackhawk helicopter friendly fire incident.

Global Engagement: A Vision for the 21st Century Air Force detailed the Air Force vision, which stems from doctrine. Many of the concepts discussed in *Global Engagement: A Vision for the 21st Century Air Force* are directly related doctrinal concepts covered in AFDD-1, *Air Force Basic Doctrine*, September 1997.[5] These concepts include the core competencies of the United States Air Force, which further detail the mission of the Air Force and reinforce Air Force core identity.

Global Engagement: A Vision for the 21st Century Air Force stated "But technology and tactics only go so far. Our core values, history, mission and the professionalism with which they are brought together are what make us the institution we are today. Our core values are simple and forthright…These values are both a guide and source of great pride to the men and women of the Air Force team."[6] The document goes on to state "The men and women of the Air Force can build upon a tremendous heritage. They are the beneficiaries of an Air Force forged in World War II by the vision of airmen such as General Henry H. (Hap) Arnold. We have the opportunity today, on the eve of the 21st Century, to build a new vision that will ensure the future vitality of our force. Our challenge is to dominate air and space as a unique dimension of military power. *Global Engagement* provides the strategic blueprint for meeting that challenge.[7]

Global Vigilance Reach and Power, published in November 2000, builds on the constructs of *Global Engagement: A Vision for the 21st Century Air Force* but also

articulates Air Force identity more clearly. "We are America's Airmen. We are warriors…we will fight and win wherever our nation needs us. The aerospace realm is our domain, and we are vigilant in our commitment to defend, control and use it in our nation's interest. We are leaders…we live our core values. We are a Total Force – Active, Guard, Reserve, and Civilian – seamless in providing aerospace power."[8] The document further states "And we are partners in the Joint Team…we project aerospace power anywhere in the world, and operate in concert with America's land and sea forces, and with our allies. Wherever we serve, whatever we do, we are America's Airmen."[9]

These documents firmly state the mission, values, beliefs and vision of the United States Air Force. However, in spite of these guiding documents, the Air Force continues to struggle with the question "Who are we?" Once again, "…an organization must reside in the heads and hearts of its members. Thus, in the absence of an externalized bureaucratic structure, it becomes more important to have an internalized cognitive structure of what the organization stands for and where it intends to go -- in short, a clear sense of the organization's identity. A sense of identity serves as a rudder for navigating difficult waters."[10]

Rapid advances in technology and the dynamic nature of the strategic and political environments have required the United States Air Force to keep pace and adapt as quickly as possible to changes in the environment. The changes in the past ten years have been, in many cases, so drastic and so numerous that identity has not been able to take hold within the force. This lack of "an anchor" or "cornerstone" among the rank and file of the United States Air Force, during a time of relentless changes, left many with feelings of alienation. Many lacked feelings of sharing the organization's purpose or

mission; some lacked feelings of obligation to the Air Force and they felt little sense of fulfillment or a sense of belonging. The alienation and lack of commitment, obligation and belonging may have contributed to past and current retention difficulties.

Notes

[1] Senior Airman A. J. Bosker, "Air Force Identity, Symbol In Transition," *Air Force News*, 20 January 2000, n.p.; on-line, Internet, 12 November 2000, available from http://www.af.mil/Jan2000/n20000119_000073.html.

[2] Lt Col James M. Smith, USAF, Retired, "Air Force Culture and Cohesion: Building an Air and Space Force for the Twenty-First Century," *Airpower Journal*, 12, 3 (Fall, 1998): 40.

[3] Colonel Kent A. Mueller, "Editor's Note" *The Exceptional Release,* no.77 (Spring 2000): 3

[4] *United States Air Force Core Values*, 1 January 1997, n.p.

[5] AFDD-1, *Air Force Basic Doctrine, ,* September 1997.

[6] Ronald R. Fogleman and Sheila E. Widnall, *Global Engagement: A Vision for the 21st Century Air Force* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Air Force, 1997).

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] Michael E. Ryan and F. Whitten Peters, *Global Vigilance Reach and Power* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Air Force, 2000).

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Stuart Albert, "Organizational Identity and Identification: Charting New Waters and Building New Bridges," *Academy of Management Review,* No. 25, 1 January 2000, n.p.; on-line, Internet, available from http://www.jsonline.com/news/nat/ap/oct99/ap-laser-defense-b103199.asp.

Chapter 6

Retention Challenges

Lieutenant Colonel Julie Stanley, the Chief of Retention Policy at United States Air Force Headquarters, stated that declining retention rates are a new challenge for the Air Force. "Between 1991 and 1997, first-term, second-term and career airmen retention rates consistently surpassed target goals; however, by 1998, the Air Force missed retention targets in all three categories."[1]

In 1998, the USAF Chief of Staff conducted a survey among USAF members regarding job satisfaction, quality of life, and other issues. The 1998 Chief of Staff Survey results showed "Many Air Force members are working harder, spending more time away from home, and thinking more seriously than ever about quitting."[2] In his article, "Views of the Force," Callander discusses the published results of the 1998 Chief of Staff Survey. Numerous issues were evaluated in the survey including operations tempo, problems due to unusual job demands and leadership satisfaction. Operations and personnel tempos showed continual escalation from the 1996 survey.[3] Enlisted members averaged 46 days TDY in 1995, 54 days in 1996 and up to 60 days in 1997.[4]

Leadership questions were also evaluated in the 1998 published survey. Only 63 percent of the respondents agreed with the statement "My unit leadership is inspirational."[5] According to Callander's article, under the leadership category of

questions, job satisfaction was evaluated. Seventy-one percent of respondents agreed with the statement "I have a sense of personal fulfillment at the end of the day." Over 80 percent felt some job satisfaction.[6]

Unit issues such as leadership, morale, and recognition for effort were also part of the survey. Only 64 percent of respondents were satisfied with the amount of recognition they received for duty performance in the increased operations tempo environment.[7] This alienation degrades any sense of identity and feelings of belonging to something bigger and better than the self. The survey also noted that morale was an area of concern.[8]

The Air Force's interpretation of the results of the 1998 Chief of Staff Survey was that "People who think their jobs are important and understand how they fit into the unit's mission are generally more satisfied with their jobs."[9] This interpretation of survey results gives credence to the statement that the significant characteristic of the most successful organizations is a shared and distinct identity and purpose.[10]

No one can underestimate the importance of leadership in the retention of personnel in the Air Force. Leaders at all levels are responsible for instilling in airmen the service's identity, culture, values, esprit, and morale. The Honorable Ike Skelton, US House of Representatives, Democrat, Missouri, stated "There is little doubt that improved esprit and morale have a positive effect on retention."[11] He further states that Congress can offer pay, benefits and recognition but only the military can build and impart esprit, "that indescribable something – that makes them want to stay."[12] Esprit is important in regard to retention issues. A service, however, cannot build esprit without having a definite identity.

In his article, "Military Retention Intangibles: Esprit, Morale and Cohesion," the Honorable Ike Skelton notes that in spite of increased operations tempo and other stressful situations, the retention and morale of deployed units is high. "I have had the opportunity to talk with troops in the field, most recently in Bosnia, and their morale was sky-high. Their retention numbers were equally impressive. Why? They weren't getting paid much more and they were separated from their families. Yet, by and large, they were happy and they were reenlisting. Maybe the extra pay, such as hazardous duty pay and family separation allowance, made a difference. Maybe it's because they were doing what they signed up to do, making the world a better, safer place. Maybe. But, judging by the gleam I saw in their eyes and the pride they displayed, I say that *Esprit* was the difference."[13] In short, he asserts the reasons for positive retention rates among deployed troops are high morale, esprit, and unit cohesion that comes from a clear sense of mission and purpose. A clear sense of mission and purpose is tightly integrated with the concept of identity. Therefore, identity is a potential key to mission success and there is a strong preponderance of evidence to indicate identity is key to positive retention rates as well.

Notes

[1] Staff Sgt. K. Fitzgerald Stewart, "Retention Remains Air Force Challenge," *Air Force News*, 16 August 2000, n.p.; Internet, 5 November 2000, available from http://www.af.mil/news/Aug2000/n20000816_001235.html.

[2] Bruce D. Callander, "The Views of the Force," *Air Force Magazine* 81, no.8 (August 1998):59.

[3] Callander, 60.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Callander, 63.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] John K. Seater, et.al., *The Army in a Changing World: The Role of Organizational Vision*, RAND Report, R-3882-A, (April 1990): 67.

Notes

[11] Honorable Ike Skelton, US House of Representatives, Democrat, Missouri, "Military Retention Intangibles: Esprit, Morale and Cohesion," *Military Review* 79, no.4 (July-August 1999): 7.

[12] Skelton, 2.

[13] Skelton, 2-3.

Chapter 7

Identity Reinforcement and Retention Rescue Efforts

Is identity important? The United States Air Force thinks it is important "to establish a single, compelling theme and symbol to represent the Air Force to its members and the public."[1] General Michael E. Ryan, Air Force Chief of Staff, reiterated the importance of Air Force core identity in a recent article. General Ryan affirmed "We want to ensure our core identity is part of our culture and is understood by our own people and the citizens we serve."[2] General Ryan further stated that the Air Force's identity is both the Air Force's past heritage and the future.[3] Former Secretary of the Air Force Whitten Peters stated "We know Air Force men and women take great pride in what they do. Our identity effort crystallizes what they're thinking. It will foster unity in the Air Force …"[4]

The senior leadership of the Air Force felt so strongly about the importance of the Air Force's identity that the Air Force hired a private corporate identity firm to help define the Air Force's core identity.[5] The Air Force conducted its own internal and external research and retained Siegel and Gale for a sum of $655,000 to help Air Force leadership interpret research results and to ensure that identity is assimilated throughout the force.[6]

The Air Force's research included seven surveys, 68 focus groups and numerous interviews of both active duty and retired general officers. Colonel Ron Rand, Director

of Public Affairs, United States Air Force, stated that inputs were taken from around ten thousand people which included 7,500 enlisted members, officers and civilians from the total force. The remaining people were from the American public.[7]

The results of the research demonstrated that the United States Air Force lacked a single unifying concept or impression and that there was "little" uniformity in a visual image or illustration.[8] Colonel Rand also noted that Air Force personnel felt loyalty to the units to which personnel were assigned rather than to the Air Force as a whole.[9]

To combat the lack of core identity, Siegel and Gale recommended that the focus of Air Force identity should be placed on the Air Force global mission. The mission was the concept that continually emerged throughout the research.[10] Individual achievement, intelligence and technology and Core Values were three other themes that surfaced during the identity research.[11]

From the research results, Siegel and Gale interpreted that the core identity of the United States Air Force is a "world-class mission-ready organization" and as such they suggested that the identity concept should be "world-ready."[12] In other words, "world-ready" would be the message to the force as well as the American public and also, to the world. In addition, they recommended a symbol to depict the "world-ready" concept that embraces the past heritage of the United States Air Force and its future.[13]

Figure 1 Air Force Symbol

The new Air Force symbol updated the Army Air Corps symbol of the "Hap Arnold wings and star."[14] It modernizes the Air Force image from a Cold War force to a force of the new millennium. It preserves the past and heritage of the Air Force while focusing on the future of the aerospace mission.

The visual representation was just one initiative to culminate an effort in defining the people and the mission of the United States Air Force…the core identity. Establishing core identity was the beginning of an effort to tackle current recruiting and retention challenges. It is the core identity that gives shape, meaning and focus to reversing negative retention trends.

The key to strengthening a core identity concept throughout the service is communication. Core identity has to be effectively communicated to all personnel. If personnel relate to the service's core identity, they will then feel that they are an integral part of the United States Air Force and will feel loyalty toward it. Where there is loyalty, there is retention. Ms. Carol DiBattiste, former Under Secretary of the Air Force, stated that recruiting and retention remain among the highest priorities in the Air Force.[15] Air Force senior leadership, aware of communication deficits "declared war" on its retention difficulties and established a recruiting and retention task force in 2000.[16] The establishment of the recruiting and retention task force was a recommendation of one of two recruiting summits held in 1999.[17] Establishing the task force was a proactive initiative to combat negative trends in force strength. The task force demonstrated senior Air Force leadership's commitment to addressing issues that were effecting recruiting and retention rates.[18] The mission of the task force was to act as a focal point for more than 200 recruiting and retention initiatives.[19] In May 2000, the *Air Force News* reported

"The Air Force is continuing its 'war' on retention challenges by responding to concerns from the field on issues ranging from better communication from the top to retraining and TRICARE."[20]

Two recruiting summits took place in 2000: One in January and another in April. Focus groups continued the summits' work by going in-depth into retention issues identified during the summits. The focus groups were held at 11 bases in the CONUS and in Europe. Group membership was composed of active duty and active duty family members so as to ensure that all angles of each issue were being given the broadest amount of consideration.[21]

The primary issue of concern was that of communication.[22] The results from the focus groups revealed that there is a disparity in communications, at all levels, between Air Force personnel and Air Force leadership.[23] This lack of communication has created a sense of alienation among Air Force personnel. Because of inadequate communication, Air Force leaders, at all levels, are missing opportunities to reinforce the Air Force's core identity.

The January 2000 retention summit recommended 19 initiatives for approval. Of the 19 initiatives, five are related to communications; of these five, four are related, directly or indirectly to Air Force core identity. These initiatives include designation of career advisor positions, Air Force history, communication flow to the field, and mentoring.[24]

The January 2000 summit recommended that full-time career advisor positions be established in all units.[25] The career advisors would be points of contact for commanders, first sergeants, supervisors and all personnel and would be a resource for all retention issues.[26] The summit also recommended a greater emphasis be placed on

history and traditions of the United States Air Force, and suggested that history programs be developed to emphasize Air Force heritage and mission.[27] The summit also highlighted the importance of improved communications at all levels since communication is the key to many issues of retention.[28] Improved communications also facilitates the reinforcement of Air Force culture and core identity. Lastly, the summit concluded that mentoring was a critical link to retention.[29] Mentoring is the human art of strengthening the profession through "one-on-one" communications. Mentoring is ideal for reinforcing Air Force Core Values as well as Air Force core identity.

Air Force senior leadership recognized the need to define and establish a core identity to enhance the positive aspects of the service and to address negative retention trends. Core identity is so vital to recruiting and retention that thousands of dollars and months of research were focused toward the identity effort. Former Secretary of the Air Force, Whitten Peters summarized it best when he stated: "The Air Force is a fast-paced, fun, tough, and rewarding environment. It's about teamwork, patriotic service and belonging to a world-class organization ready to respond anywhere in the world in a matter of hours. That's what we're trying to communicate. My hope is that this identity effort will do that."[30]

With the core identity focus, and retention summits, the United States Air Force is adapting to demands for it to define itself as it moves towards the Expeditionary Air Force concept. A revised and well-communicated Air Force core identity is necessary, not only to create the sense of commitment, obligation and belonging, among Air Force personnel, but also to ensure distinctiveness and uniqueness in today's joint operations environment. It is human nature to want to belong to something bigger and better than

the singular self. Solid core identity is the key to concepts such as morale, esprit and is a cornerstone for retention.

Notes

[1] Senior Airman A. J. Bosker, "Air Force Identity, Symbol In Transition," *Air Force News*, 20 January 2000, n.p.; on-line, Internet, 12 November 2000, available from http://www.af.mil/Jan2000/n20000119_000073.html.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] "AF Task Force To Combat Recruiting, Retention Problems," *Air Force News*, 15 March 2000, n.p.; on-line, Internet, 5 November 2000, available from http://www.af.mil/news/Mar2000/n20000315_000408.html.

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] Technical Sergeant R. R. Getsy, "Retention Initiatives Address Airmen's Key Concerns," *Air Force News*, 31 May 2000, n.p.; on-line, Internet, 5 November 2000, available from http://www.af.mil/news/May2000/n20000531_000835.html.

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] *Ibid.*

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] *Ibid.*

[26] *Ibid.*

[27] *Ibid.*

[28] *Ibid.*

[29] *Ibid.*

[30] Bosker, n.p.

Chapter 8

Conclusions

A definite and well-established core identity is important to the viability of the United States Air Force. As the Air Force operates in an increasingly joint environment during a time of global and political uncertainty, core identity takes on even greater importance. "A sense of identity serves as a rudder for navigating difficult waters."[1] Core identity is rooted in the heritage of the United States Air Force as well as its future.

Core identity is the product of an organization's culture and is the foundation for unit cohesiveness, morale, welfare and esprit. Core identity, organizational culture, unit cohesiveness, morale, welfare and esprit are all highly integrated concepts. However, it is core identity to which personnel relate, and identify. Core identity inspires and maintains a sense of commitment to the organization's mission, obligation to the service and belonging to something "more important" than the self, which is a basic human need.

For many years, the core identity of the United States Air Force revolved around the concepts of strategic bombing and nuclear deterrence.[2] The organization's core identity was linked to its strategic nuclear deterrent mission. However, a shift in focus away from strategic nuclear deterrence and strategic bombing towards more tactical missions gradually challenged the identity of the United States Air Force.[3] The Air Force became segregated into various specialty communities with fracture lines between operational

and support personnel. The divisions were most apparent within the operations community between bomber, tactical fighter, and airlift personnel.[4]

One has to question, "Does the United States Air Force have a core identity?" The answer is "Yes." Air Force Doctrine and other documents such as "Global Vigilance Reach and Power," and "Air Force Core Values" clearly define the core identity of the United States Air Force. The documents exist and therefore the foundation of the core identity exists. The challenge the Air Force faces in establishing a core identity is that it has not been clearly articulated to rest of the force. Doctrine is mostly read by officers attending or enrolled in Professional Military Education. Beyond the academic world, doctrine is not well-integrated into the day to day operations of the Air Force. Doctrine is only useful if it is read, understood, assimilated, articulated, and practiced.

Other documents, such as "Global Vigilance Reach and Power" clearly articulate Air Force core identity: "We are America's Airmen. We are warriors…we will fight and win wherever our nation needs us. The aerospace realm is our domain, and we are vigilant in our commitment to defend, control and use it in our nation's interest. We are leaders…we live our core values. We are a Total Force – Active, Guard, Reserve, and Civilian – seamless in providing aerospace power."[5] Again, Air Force core identity can be found in documents, but documents are only useful if they are read, understood, and assimilated.

Core identity is vital to an organization; it tells the members of the organization who the organization is and what it believes and tells outside groups the same. Core identity is important to retention of members of an organization; members have to know what the core identity of the organization is and what it believes in order to decide whether they

want to "belong" or continue to belong to that organization. The United States Air Force senior leadership, realizing the importance of core identity, spent hours of research and thousands of dollars in developing a visual representation of the identity of the United States Air Force. As stated earlier, "…an organization must reside in the heads and hearts of its members."[6] The new Air Force symbol facilitates a cognitive picture, a representation of what it means to be a member of the United States Air Force.

There is no scientific evidence that core identity positively or negatively impacts retention. Scientific research in this area would be valuable to both the recruiting and retention efforts of all armed services. However, one can easily say that units which demonstrate high morale, high self-esteem, positive cohesiveness and esprit have members that feel a sense of commitment, obligation and belonging. Members who feel they are an integral part of an organization and that their contributions are important, are members that feel a sense of self-fulfillment. They feel that they belong.

As noted earlier, the Honorable Ike Skelton asserted that positive retention rates among deployed troops can be attributed to high morale, esprit and unit cohesion that comes from a clear sense of mission and purpose.[7] A clear sense of mission and purpose is tightly integrated with the concept of identity. Therefore, identity is key to mission success and there is a strong preponderance of circumstantial evidence to indicate that identity is key to positive retention rates as well.

Notes

[1] Stuart Albert, "Organizational Identity and Identification: Charting New Waters and Building New Bridges," *Academy of Management Review,* 25,1 January 2000, n.p.; on-line, Internet, available from http://www.jsonline.com/news/nat/ap/oct99/ap-laser-defense-b103199.asp.

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[2] Lt Col James M. Smith, USAF, Retired, "Air Force Culture and Cohesion: Building an Air and Space Force for the Twenty-First Centure," *Airpower Journal*, 12, 3 (Fall, 1998): 42.

[3] Smith, 43.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Michael E. Ryan and F. Whitten Peters, *Global Vigilance Reach and Power* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Air Force, 2000).

[6] Albert, n.p.

[7] Honorable Ike Skelton, US House of Representatives, Democrat, Missouri, "Military Retention Intangibles: Esprit, Morale and Cohesion," *Military Review* 79, no.4 (July-August 1999): 7.

Chapter 9

Recommendations: Reinforcing Air Force Core Identity and Improving Retention

> *"We cannot tolerate an indifference toward retention. The post-Cold War downsizing is over. We must work doubly hard to retain "the best and brightest" in the military – not just because it makes good economic sense, but because they make more combat-effective units."*
>
> —The Honorable Ike Skelton

Air Force core identity exists however; it is not clearly articulated throughout the United States Air Force. Improved communications at all levels is crucial to reinforcing the Air Force core identity and improving retention, as well. Commanders should seize every available opportunity to express the core identity of the United States Air Force to their personnel. There are four areas that need focus in order to reinforce Air Force core identity: history and traditions, doctrine, core values and professionalism.

History is important. An organization cannot effectively chart the future unless it has an appreciation for its heritage. Air Force history is fascinating and it is important to keep it alive. A strong unit historical program that presents Air Force history to unit members on a regular basis is a great way to preserve heritage. Another way to preserve the past is to regularly practice Air Force traditions. There are numerous traditions that have gone by the wayside. It may be prudent to "dust-off" some old Air Force traditions that express the uniqueness of military life, update them and reinstitute them.

Doctrine is the basis of our mission and hence of our core identity. It provides a framework for our training and operations. Commanders should emphasize doctrine and being doctrine awareness. Discussion about doctrine can be included in commanders' calls at regular intervals. Regularly reinforcing doctrinal concepts is key to doctrine awareness.

One cannot discuss Air Force core identity without including Air Force Core Values. Air Force Core Values received so much "press" when inaugurated in 1997, that many now have taken the Air Force Core Values for granted. Core Values need to be openly discussed and continually emphasized since they are the basis of the Air Force's moral character and code of conduct.

Lastly, commanders should emphasize the uniqueness of the military profession. The profession of arms is a "higher calling" of service and sacrifice. Commanders should regularly acknowledge the sacrifices of their unit members and should reiterate the tremendous responsibilities that they accept. Military service cannot be compared with civilian life; although the Air Force is working diligently to improve the quality of life for its members, commanders should always emphasis the professionalism and honor of military service.

Actively focusing on Air Force history and traditions, doctrine, core values and professionalism will reinforce Air Force core identity. Regular promotion of Air Force core identity will provide personnel with something to grasp and hold on to. If the Air Force core identity is positive and supportive, members will want to reenlist. Once again, it is not about the economy – the Air Force cannot compete with civilian life. It is a matter of belonging and feeling like personal contributions make a difference.

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